
Sylvia Houghteling. "Sentiment in Silks. Safavid Figural Textiles in Mughal Courtly Culture"

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- 1 Sensory, notional, and emotional properties of silks and other fabrics are discussed in this essay which draws on historiography, poetry, as well as visual representation of textiles in paintings and figurative/textual supplements to fabrics, in order to highlight the ever-present, yet involuntarily perceived and therefore rarely noticed, synesthetic experiences caused by textiles. Although its primary purpose is to argue for the presence of a heightened sensory awareness of textiles in the Mughal court, the study also provides a retrospective survey of precedents in other Islamic lands, especially the embroidered Caliphal robes of honour (*khil'at*) which had communicated a wide range of emotions to the lands where they had been exported, long before local Indian workmanship would reach a similar technological complexity. Divided into four sections, the essay first outlines the development of Mughal textile crafts and connoisseurship which followed the annexation of Kashmir and its dependencies, including Gilgit, by Akbar in 1586, when the Mughals gained access to its sericulture. In this period, Akbar and his successors developed a subtle sense for the tactile values of silks, including their softness, as well as their immaterial qualities, like smell, which local industries could not, for a long time, satisfy, despite the best efforts of the rulers to set up manufactories across India. The second part explores how textiles conveyed their multi-layered meanings beyond the Mughal court. Figural cloths, argues

Houghteling, are like figural borders of album pages which can add new dimensions to their primary purpose. Similarly, the author points out how the depictions of figural fabrics in paintings, like a portrait of Jahāngīr resting his elbow on a Safavid silk robe, can undercut the realism of the painting.

- 2 Based on a number of texts and anecdotes, the next part connects poetry and textiles in multiple ways, first by reminding how Persian-language poets tended to compare their craft to weaving, then by proceeding to individuals, among them Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqšband Yazdī, who united the two professions. Finally, the fourth part is mostly about a particular robe and an adjoining *farmān* that were sent by the Mughal ruler to a regional Rajput ally in Bikaner (now in the Ganga Golden Jubilee Museum, Bikaner), in 1597. This self-referential "speaking object" is replete with texts and depictions which may allude to the prince for whom the gift was intended. Apart from this object, the concluding remarks include a surviving court robe which still contain traces of perspiration, a bodily expression of emotion which, perhaps, attests to the stressful life of Safavid courtiers.

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